



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street, WTR-6
San Francisco, CA 94105

17 September 2012

Mr. Gerardo Gomez
Kern Valley State Prison
D1-113
PO Box 5104
Delano, CA 93216-5104

Dear Mr. Gomez:

Thank you for your letter of 9 September 2012 asking about the status of the upgrades to the Kern Valley State Prison drinking water treatment plant and for information on the health effects of drinking and bathing with water containing arsenic.

We contacted the California Department of Public Health, which oversees the water system at KVSP. They told us that the completion date for the arsenic treatment system has been delayed from the expected August start. It is now expected to go on line in December 2012.

I'll try to answer your question about the effects of drinking high levels of arsenic in water in two parts: what arsenic does to people, and what you can expect from drinking water at levels above our standard.

With respect to arsenic, if you consume enough of it, it is definitely a poison and has several adverse physiological effects. At high enough levels (about 100-200 mg), it stops mitochondrial respiration, your cells can't generate energy, and they (and you) die. This is what is meant by acute toxicity. In addition, arsenic appears to cause oxidative damage and stimulates the formation of a variety of physiological stress-related proteins. At lower levels ingested chronically over a longer time (1-10 mg per day or so for months or years), this still goes on, but not enough to kill you outright. However, your system may be weakened to the point that it isn't as effective at fighting off other kinds of cellular damage, which can build up and lead to other problems. Adverse health effects may occur only after years of exposure to these lower levels. Some of these include circulatory, neurological and liver problems. For example, a variety of skin diseases (hyperkeratoses, blackfoot, hyperpigmentation) are known to occur at levels starting around 0.1-0.2 mg per day. Arsenic also has hormonal effects that can cause diseases such as diabetes. These appear to happen even at much lower levels, perhaps less than 0.1 mg per day.

Arsenic is a known human carcinogen. It appears to cause broken and missing chromosomes and other chromosomal abnormalities. It can cause lung, bladder, and skin cancers, and may cause liver, kidney and prostate cancers. Elevated cancer levels are seen in groups of people drinking water with arsenic levels of 0.1-0.2 mg per liter, which is about 0.2-0.4 mg per day. It usually

takes many years of drinking water at these levels for cancers to occur. At higher levels (0.5-1.0 mg per day), these cancers can form faster.

Fortunately, you aren't getting that much arsenic in the KVSP drinking water. My understanding is that the levels of arsenic in the drinking water at KVSP are around 0.015-0.020 mg per liter, slightly above our Maximum Contaminant Level of 0.010 mg per liter. If you consume 2 liters of water a day by drinking it or from eating food cooked in this water, you get about 0.030-0.040 mg per day of arsenic. It may be a bit of a comfort that medical studies don't show much if any disease being caused at these levels.

I hope that this addressed your concerns. If not, you can reach me at the above address or at 415 972-3569.

Sincerely,

Bruce A. MacIer, PhD
Regional Toxicologist
Drinking Water Program